

Orange Indiana by GalaxyGazing

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Summary:

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Orange Indiana

It was the peak of autumn in 1989 when Mike wondered wistfully what he was doing with his life.

The looming question arose from his sudden abundance of time and involuntary venture into loneliness. Last spring, he and his friends had graduated from high school. While the moment called for celebration, no one had warned him just how final that made things.

Lucas, almost immediately, moved to Connecticut for a full ride at college and it was really no surprise that Max moved with him. School was never her passion but she was the best mechanic around and knew she could use that skill anywhere. Mike was happy for them.

Dustin hung around for the summer but there was an internship waiting for him in Florida that offered to fulfill his curiosity for studying animals.

And El.

After twelve years as a scientific experiment, being prodded and tortured, robbed of her childhood, no one would blame her if she wanted to spend the rest of her time living out the normal, pleasant, comfortable life she was denied. But that wasn't El.

Instead of focusing on her own freedom, El yearned to use her powers to help others. Of her own volition she was called away to use her abilities to aid other people who were helpless, other children who really needed her. Just as four small town misfits had needed her once.

Mike supposed that was one of the reasons he had loved her. And he knew she burned too brightly to keep to himself. A sun is not a star that burns for any one man, but a fiery mass of hope that burns so that all may bask in its radiance.

Now, he watched the leaves break from the trees when the wind blew.

Hawkins, Indiana had returned to whatever was considered normal before the upside down had twisted through it. And when all was well, one realized just how plain and still it was.

It was one of those places that was ideal to raise a child, or ideal to be a child in, but it held a terrible emptiness for anyone in their teens or twenties. Its calm, family-oriented streets were quiet and the acres of woods were vast placeholders for nothingness.

Before long, Mike started to feel claustrophobic in his own home. With Nancy out of the house and Holly still too young for much responsibility, his parents focused all of their attention on him. Mike was regularly informed that if he was, as he explained, going to take a gap year before looking for a university, he was certainly going to find a job.

He'd been allowed the summer to rest, but now midway through October, he was frequently reminded of their bargain. It was not as if he wasn't looking, but the newfound confusion of losing his support group definitely wasn't speeding his flight. And truth be told, he wasn't entirely sure yet if college was for him.

Summer had felt normal, like his annual vacation between grades, but then school never came and autumn felt strange. It was uncomfortable, this absence of obligations and far, far too much time.

When he couldn't stand to wonder *what comes next* any longer, Mike grabbed his coat and headed out to see the one person who hadn't left him quite yet.

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Will's house was as equally unchanged as his own, but it was familiar

in a comforting sort of way. It was still full of life and new occasions and people who welcomed him. When the Christmas lights and crayon sketches had been taken down, Mike was grateful to see that same wood and wallpaper, just as it had always been.

Jonathan had moved out a year ago to pursue a photography career in Illinois but Will, to his mother's elation, had remained at home. However, Mike knew what Will had never voiced to anyone: there was nothing in the world Will wanted to do more than draw, but art school was expensive.

Instead of putting that burden on his mother, who Will knew would have run herself ragged picking up extra shifts so he could achieve his dream, Will had simply lied and said he didn't know what he wanted to do after high school and asked to have a year to think about it.

Unfortunately, Will's lie was Mike's truth. Mike really *didn't* know what he wanted.

Mike knew his best friend deserved better than Hawkins. There was nothing for him here and he was too talented to waste away in this in-between town where nothing new ever happened and he wouldn't be appreciated for his genius.

He wanted to tell Will this, but didn't because he understood his situation. Instead, he simply contemplated just how very selfish he was for being so happy that Will stayed.

"Hey, come in," Will beamed and Mike was only too eager to get out of the cold and into that warm, enticing house. He treasured moments like these, when he could show up uninvited and they would travel up to Will's bedroom without so many words, like he was expected.

Like the rest of the house, Will's room was mostly unchanged as well, and it was hyper apparent to Mike that Will was, by far, the thing about this place that had changed the most.

In recent years, the rest of the world began to finally see what Mike had always seen—Will Byers was beautiful. Mike thought that was

the right word for it because his features weren't bold enough to be considered handsome.

He was almost as tall as Mike was but thin, effeminate. He'd long lost the bowl haircut and traded it for a much shorter style that revealed the soft features of his face. He was too lovely and too gifted to be in Hawkins, just as El had been, but for some reason fate wouldn't let him leave as she had.

Mike supposed, now that he thought of it, he had changed as well. He'd grown into his features a bit more, surely, but had still kept his hair on the longer side. Not as long as it was in his youth but, if he could admit it to himself, he was slow to let go of familiarity.

Will made a place for him on his bed and Mike was infinitely grateful for all of the things he didn't ask.

He didn't ask Mike about the job hunt. Or how it felt to be graduated. Or his plans for the future. He merely jumped right into telling him about the new project he was working on: a black and white charcoal study of all the natural landmarks in Hawkins.

Mike listened to him for hours and, when Will finished, he pined to hear him go on for many more.

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More and more autumn days Mike found his feet took him back to Will's house, even if he wasn't planning to go there.

There was something more than the escape from the mundane motionless of Hawkins that drew him back to that front porch and he was starting to scare himself when he realized why.

One night Will recalled how, even in his darkest hours, Mike never left him at the hospital. Before he could cry, Mike pulled Will into his shoulder in a half hug to let him know he was still here. He wasn't going anywhere. Not at this rate, anyway.

Another night, Will asked if he could draw Mike for what must have been the tenth time. It was both heaven and hell to have Will make such studious eye contact with him while recording his likeness in charcoal.

And one particular night, Joyce had to work an overnight shift.

The house was wide and empty but the only part of it that mattered was the tiny space between their lips to steal air from when they broke.

Will's eyelashes fluttered against Mike's cheek and he gasped these quiet sounds that Mike just wanted to swallow. He cupped a hand to the nape of Will's neck to cradle him closer and Will held Mike's face between both of his own.

The kiss was very late. Probably five years or so, maybe longer. Maybe it always had been. They moved like they both knew it, like they both realized it was overdue.

The noises made when they separated were wet and loud in Mike's ears and he was dizzy when he realized how much time he had wasted *not* doing this.

With gentle guidance and a little shifting, Will was on the bed beneath him and Mike was kissing into his neck, up under his jaw. He felt the heat pool downward and ran a light hand between Will's legs to see if it had for him too. Will whimpered into the kiss and Mike broke from him, their foreheads still touching.

"Is this okay?" He asked with no voice, only air. It was barely audible even to someone so close, but Will understood and nodded against him. His delicate brow knotted upward and he kissed the corner of Mike's mouth, winding his fingers into his dark hair and spreading his legs a little more for him.

Mike sighed shakily and decided to let desire take over because if he thought about it too much longer, he'd panic. Running his hands up Will's stomach, chest, he slipped his shirt up over his head and helped himself to that heaving torso, placing a kiss over his quickly beating heart.

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"Do you think we'll ever get out of this place?" Mike asked one winter night when they were bundled up under too many covers. The question wasn't bitter, though. It was genuine. And it may have been partly due to the fact that Mike might not have minded that fate if Will was there with him.

"I'm not sure," Will said quietly, head resting on Mike's chest, "I think, wherever I go, it will always be a part of me."

"You deserve better than Hawkins," Mike finally mused aloud, and it was unclear if he was confessing that more to Will or himself.

Will propped himself up and turned to look Mike in the eyes, "We all deserved better than Hawkins. What happened here, what we lived through...what we still live with."

The concern on Mike's face must have shown and he reached out a hand to cup Will's cheek. Even with the Now Memories gone, Will still awoke from the occasional, more easily diagnosable nightmare, and Mike considered himself incredibly fortunate to be there for him when one of those happened.

Will covered Mike's hand with his own and turned his face to the side to kiss his palm.

"I'm okay, don't worry."

“Wherever you go, I want to be with you.”

It shocked them both to hear Mike say those words. Will, because of just how sincere they were, and Mike because of just how confident he was to say them. Will lowered himself so their noses touched, smiling amiably, almost fragile.

“Are you sure about that? I go...pretty far sometimes.”

Mike crushed the empty space into a kiss, and then into another kiss because, *god yes*.

“Anywhere.”

And for the first time since graduation, for the first time since the endless agony of uncertain tomorrows began, for the first time since the leaves burned orange and this little town felt small but safe when he was with the one person he would care for until the end of time...

Mike knew what he wanted for his future.

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The End